

The Canticle of the Creatures at 800: Franciscan Cosmology and Contemporary Environmental Ethics

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Abstract

This article examines the 800th anniversary of St. Francis of Assisi's *Cantico delle Creature* (1224) as a resource for rethinking contemporary environmental ethics. Using a qualitative method of close textual analysis situated within material ecocriticism, particularly the work of Iovino and Oppermann (2014), I argue that Francis's text offers a proto-materialist sensibility that recognizes agency in nonhuman matter and unsettles anthropocentric divisions implicated in climate change, biodiversity loss, and ecological degradation. Drawing on Italian ecocritical scholarship (Iovino, 2016; Fargione, 2015; Armbruster, 1998), this study demonstrates how the *Canticle's* kinship language and vernacular accessibility model what I term "material kinship"—an ethical orientation that extends recognition of agency and narrative capacity to nonhuman entities, and that I distinguish from related concepts such as material agency, relational ontology, and deep ecology. By situating Francis's medieval cosmology in conversation with contemporary debates on the Anthropocene, climate justice, and posthumanist ethics, the article considers how his integration of social and ecological concerns resonates with the environmental humanities' call for "integral ecology," without claiming that Francis anticipated these frameworks in any strong sense. The article closes by considering, more selectively, what Franciscan material kinship might offer to climate policy, environmental education, and multispecies justice, treating medieval texts as a resource for contemporary ecological reflection rather than a template to be applied directly.

Keywords: St. Francis of Assisi, Canticle of the Creatures, material ecocriticism, environmental humanities, Anthropocene, climate justice, Italian ecocriticism, posthumanism, material agency

Introduction

The year 2024 marked the 800th anniversary of St. Francis of Assisi's composition of the *Cantico delle Creature* (Canticle of the Creatures), also known as the *Cantico di Frate Sole* (Canticle of Brother Sun) (Armstrong et al., 1999, pp. 113–114). The year 2026 marks the 800th anniversary of Francis's death, making this moment particularly opportune for reassessing his enduring contributions to environmental thought and ethics. As climate change accelerates, biodiversity collapses at unprecedented rates, and the Anthropocene epoch forces fundamental reconsideration of human-nature relationships, Francis's thirteenth-century text offers unexpected resources for reimagining our planetary predicament.

This article is guided by three research questions: (1) How does the Canticle's kinship language construct nonhuman matter as agential rather than inert, and how might this construction be understood through material ecocriticism? (2) In what ways does Francis's vernacular composition function as a form of ecological and social accessibility, and what does this suggest for contemporary environmental justice? (3) What does the Canticle's integration of praise for creation with concern for human suffering offer to present-day debates on integral ecology and climate justice, and where do the limits of that offering lie?

In addressing these questions, the article advances three interconnected arguments. First, drawing on Iovino and Oppermann's (2014) material ecocriticism, I contend that the Canticle enacts what I call "material kinship"—a recognition of agency, narrative capacity, and ethical standing in nonhuman matter. I want to be precise about the kind of claim this is: I am not suggesting that Francis anticipated posthumanist theory in any strong sense, since his conceptual vocabulary and theological commitments belonged to his own time. Rather, I argue that the Canticle displays a conceptual resonance with posthumanist and material-ecocritical thought, and that it is retrospectively applicable as a resource for thinking through present ecological questions—three related but distinct claims (anticipation,

resonance, and retrospective applicability) that this article keeps separate throughout. Second, engaging with Italian ecocritical work by Fargione (2015) and Armbruster (1998), I demonstrate how Francis's vernacular choice democratizes ecological knowledge in ways that speak to contemporary environmental justice concerns. Third, I argue that the *Canticle's* integration of social and ecological concerns resonates with the "integral ecology" called for by environmental humanities scholars (Oppermann & Iovino, 2017), while remaining a modest, historically situated precedent rather than a fully developed policy framework.

The *Canticle*, composed in Umbrian vernacular circa 1224, is often described as among the earliest surviving literary texts in an Italian vernacular—a claim that requires some qualification. Scholars of early Italian literature point to earlier vernacular fragments and inscriptions, and disagreement over which of these counts as properly "literary" depends on genre criteria that are themselves contested (Petrocchi, 1992). What can be said with more confidence is that the *Canticle* is among the earliest vernacular Italian texts of clear literary ambition, formal sophistication, and wide circulation, and that its vernacular composition constitutes, as I discuss below, a significant reimagining of matter itself. Where contemporary environmental crisis stems partly from treating nature as inert resource, Francis's text grants agency, voice, and kinship to sun, water, fire, and earth. This is not naive animism but a sophisticated recognition of what Iovino and Oppermann (2014, p. 3) call "storied matter"—the capacity of material entities to act, affect, and signify beyond human intention. Francis's material kinship offers philosophical resources relevant to the present ecological moment: a way of imagining a shift from domination to relation, from extraction to care, from hierarchy to kinship.

Methodology

This study undertakes a qualitative close textual analysis of the *Cantico delle Creature*, informed theoretically by material ecocriticism (Iovino & Oppermann, 2014) and by Italian ecocritical scholarship (Iovino, 2016; Fargione, 2013, 2015, 2017; Armbruster, 1998). The primary text is treated in the original Umbrian vernacular, with reference to the redaction preserved in the Assisi Codex 338 and to the English translation in Armstrong et al. (1999);

where translation choices bear on the argument, this is noted explicitly in the text.

Passages were selected for close reading on the basis of their density of kinship terminology (frate, sora, matre) and their treatment of the four elements—sun, water, fire, and earth—since these are the stanzas in which the Canticle most directly stages relationships between the human speaker and nonhuman matter. The stanzas devoted to human forgiveness and death are treated more briefly, as their primary function in the argument is to establish the text's juxtaposition of ecological and social concern rather than to supply further material description.

Historical contextualization—concerning composition, manuscript transmission, and thirteenth-century intellectual context—is kept analytically separate from the article's contemporary theoretical application. The former draws on Franciscan historiography (Fortini, 1981; Esser, 1949; Sorrell, 1988) and is presented as a claim about the medieval text and its milieu; the latter draws on material ecocriticism and environmental humanities scholarship and is presented as a claim about the text's usefulness for contemporary reflection. Conflating these two registers—treating a historically grounded observation as though it were evidence that the medieval text anticipated present-day theory—is precisely the risk this article seeks to avoid. The distinction between historical claim and contemporary application is maintained throughout, including in the discussion of "material kinship" itself and its relation to adjacent concepts, addressed later in the article.

Historical and Textual Context

Composition and Manuscripts

The Cantico delle Creature was composed during Francis's final years, most likely in late 1224 or early 1225, while he resided at San Damiano near Assisi (Fortini, 1981, pp. 556–558). According to Thomas of Celano's *Vita Prima* (1228–29), Francis composed the hymn during a period of severe illness and near-blindness, comforting himself and others with praises of the Lord despite his tribulations (Celano, as cited in Armstrong et al., 1999, pp. 254–256). It

was in this extremity that Francis composed what would become one of the foundational texts of Italian literature.

The earliest extant manuscript, preserved in the Biblioteca Comunale of Assisi (Codex 338), dates to approximately 1250, though scholars debate whether this represents Francis's original Umbrian dialect or a later transcription (Mancini, 1919, pp. 26–43). The opening lines establish the Canticle's characteristic tone:

Altissimu, onnipotente, bon Signore, tue so' le laude, la gloria e l'honore et onne benedictione. [Most High, all-powerful, good Lord, Yours are the praises, the glory, the honor, and all blessing.]

The text's structure comprises eleven stanzas praising God through various elements of creation. Francis addresses each with familial intimacy: *Laudato si', mi' Signore, per frate Sole* (Praised be you, my Lord, through Brother Sun), *per sora Luna e le stelle* (through Sister Moon and the stars), *per frate Vento* (through Brother Wind), *per sor'Aqua* (through Sister Water), *per frate Focu* (through Brother Fire), and *per sora nostra matre Terra* (through our Sister Mother Earth) (full text in Armstrong et al., 1999, pp. 113–114). The culmination arrives with the stanza on death:

Laudato si', mi' Signore, per sora nostra Morte corporale, da la quale nullu homo vivente pò skappare. [Praised be you, my Lord, through our Sister Bodily Death, from whom no living person can escape.]

The final stanzas on forgiveness and death were added later, possibly in response to specific events in Francis's final year—reconciliation between warring civic factions in Assisi and Francis's own approaching death (Esser, 1949, pp. 193–205).

Linguistic Innovation and Vernacular Authority

Francis's decision to compose in Umbrian vernacular rather than Latin represents a deliberate challenge to clerical monopoly on religious discourse.

As Leonardi (1989, p. 185) observes, this choice democratized access to theological reflection precisely when ecclesiastical authority sought to consolidate control over biblical interpretation (translation mine); the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) had recently prohibited unauthorized preaching and restricted scriptural translation (Tanner, 1990, pp. 233–235), making Francis's vernacular composition a politically charged act.

The linguistic register of the Canticle merits particular attention. Francis employs the kinship terms frate (brother) and sora (sister) for natural phenomena, a usage without clear precedent in Western Christian literature (Sorrell, 1988, pp. 89–92). While patristic sources occasionally personified nature, they typically maintained hierarchical relationships between humanity and creation (Daniélou, 1948, pp. 1–16); Francis's consistent use of sibling terminology instead suggests horizontal relationships, a notable departure from both biblical and scholastic cosmology.

Material Ecocriticism and Franciscan Agency

Storied Matter and Material Kinship

Iovino and Oppermann's (2014) material ecocriticism provides a crucial framework for understanding the Canticle's contemporary relevance. They argue that matter is a text where the "forces of creation" of selves and stories are inscribed (Iovino & Oppermann, 2014, p. 75). This concept of "storied matter"—the recognition that material entities possess narrative capacity and agency—resonates with Francis's treatment of sun, water, fire, and earth as subjects with voice and personality.

Consider Francis's portrayal of water:

*Laudato si', mi' Signore, per sor'Acqua, la quale è multo
utile et humile et pretiosa et casta. [Praised be you, my
Lord, through Sister Water, who is very useful and humble
and precious and chaste.]*

Iovino (2014, p. 80) would recognize in this passage what she calls "agentic narrativity"—water's capacity to tell her own story through physical properties

that exceed human interpretation. Water's humility is not metaphor imposed by Francis but a literal description of physical behavior: water seeks low places, flows around obstacles, sustains rather than dominates. Water's preciousness emerges from her life-giving agency, her material capacity to enable existence. Francis's language enacts what material ecocriticism theorizes: that matter acts, signifies, and participates in narratives of agency and change (Iovino & Oppermann, 2014, p. 7).

This material kinship challenges the dualism that Fargione (2013, p. 172) identifies as central to environmental crisis. In her work on Italian environmental literature, Fargione argues that anthropocentrism depends on the separation between human subjects and material objects, between active culture and passive nature. Francis's kinship language collapses this separation. By calling water "sister," he grants her the subjectivity typically reserved for humans; by acknowledging her utility, he recognizes her agency; by praising her qualities, he responds to her narrative.

The fire stanza demonstrates this material agency even more explicitly:

*Laudato si', mi' Signore, per frate Focu, per lo quale
ennallumini la nocte: ed ello è bello et iocundo et robustoso
et forte. [Praised be you, my Lord, through Brother Fire,
through whom you light the night: and he is beautiful and
playful and robust and strong.]*

Fire "plays" (iocundo)—a verb denoting intentional action and personality, recognizing fire's actual behavior: its unpredictable movement, its responsiveness to conditions, its capacity to transform matter. As Iovino (2014, p. 82) argues, acknowledging matter's agency means accepting that the world does not exist for our sole benefit but has its own trajectories, rhythms, and modes of being—precisely what Francis's playful fire embodies.

From Domination to Participation

The Cantic's material kinship speaks to what Iovino (2016, p. 4) identifies as a defining feature of modernity: the ontological separation between humans and nature that has enabled environmental destruction. Medieval theology, drawing on Genesis 1:28's command to "have dominion" over creation, largely

maintained such hierarchies (White, 1967; Aquinas, 1265–1274/1981, I, q. 96, aa. 1–2).

Francis offers a notably different model. His kinship terms (*frate*, *sora*) establish horizontal rather than vertical relationships—not mere sentimentality but a form of philosophical sophistication. As Armbruster (1998, p. 225) argues, recognizing kinship with nonhuman nature requires reimagining subjectivity itself as relational, distributed, and materially embedded. Francis's siblings—sun, moon, wind, water, fire, earth—are treated not as objects for human use but as subjects participating in a shared cosmic community.

Differentiating Material Kinship from Related Concepts

Because material kinship is this article's central conceptual contribution, it is worth specifying more precisely how it relates to, and differs from, several adjacent frameworks.

Material agency, as developed by Iovino and Oppermann (2014), names the capacity of matter to act, signify, and participate in processes of change, independent of any particular ethical orientation toward that matter. Material kinship presupposes material agency but adds to it a specifically relational and affective dimension: the naming of matter as sibling or parent, which material agency alone does not require. One can affirm that water acts without thereby treating water as kin.

Relational ontology, a broader term used across environmental philosophy and Indigenous studies (Todd, 2016), holds that entities are constituted by their relations rather than existing as prior, bounded substances. Material kinship is compatible with relational ontology but is narrower: it specifies one particular kind of relation—familial, horizontal, and affectively loaded—rather than describing relationality as such.

Ecological kinship, as used more loosely in environmental writing, often designates a general sense of connectedness with the natural world. Francis's material kinship is more textually specific: it is enacted through a particular grammatical and rhetorical structure—sibling address, paratactic description, performative praise—analyzed in detail below, rather than asserted as a general attitude.

Deep ecology (Naess, 1973) argues for the intrinsic value of all living things and for an expanded, ecological sense of self. Material kinship shares deep ecology's rejection of instrumentalism but does not require the metaphysical claim of self-expansion or dissolution of boundaries between self and world; Francis's siblings remain distinct—sun is sun, water is water—even as they are drawn into relationship.

Multispecies ethics (Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010; Meijer, 2019) extends ethical, and sometimes political, consideration to nonhuman animals and, in some formulations, to other living systems. Material kinship overlaps with multispecies ethics but extends further, to non-living matter such as fire, water, and wind—a scope closer to material ecocriticism than to the animal-centered core of much multispecies scholarship.

Integral ecology (Francis, 2015) links ecological and social concern within a single ethical and theological framework. Material kinship is a narrower, more textually grounded concept: where integral ecology is a programmatic framework for linking environmental and social justice, material kinship names the specific rhetorical and conceptual mechanism—sibling address to nonhuman matter—through which the Cantic enacts one instance of that linkage.

Specifying these distinctions does not resolve every question about material kinship's originality; the concept remains, as I note in the conclusion, in need of further elaboration, particularly in relation to Indigenous kinship cosmologies (Todd, 2016). This article does not attempt to synthesize material kinship with Indigenous frameworks, but their comparison represents an important direction for future work.

The Anthropocene Challenge: Francis in the Age of Climate Crisis

Planetary Emergency and Conceptual Failure

The Anthropocene—the geological epoch defined by human planetary impact (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000)—demands new ways of imagining human-nature relationships. As Chakrabarty (2009, p. 206) argues, climate change forces us to think of human agency over multiple and incommensurable scales at once, grasping individual actions and planetary processes simultaneously while recognizing that human agency has become a geological force.

The Canticle engages this challenge in a limited but suggestive way. Francis's cosmic scope—praising God through sun, moon, stars, wind, water, fire, earth—situates human existence within planetary systems, yet his intimate kinship language maintains connection to embodied, particular experiences of matter. As Iovino (2016, p. 127) argues, material ecocriticism helps us think across scales, recognizing how local stories are embedded in larger material processes. Francis's Sister Water can be read as simultaneously the spring at San Damiano and, in a contemporary ecocritical register, part of the hydrological cycle; Brother Fire is both hearth flame and, read retrospectively, an instance of the solar energy that powers life more broadly.

This scalar thinking has taken on new urgency as climate crisis accelerates. The 2023 IPCC reports confirm human activities have unequivocally caused 1.1°C of warming, with consequences already visible in melting ice sheets, rising seas, and stressed ecosystems (IPCC, 2023, pp. 4–9), yet public response remains inadequate partly because dominant frameworks treat nature as separate from human concern. Iovino and Oppermann (2014, p. 5) argue that environmental humanities scholarship should narrate matter in ways that make visible the agencies obscured by mechanistic worldviews—work that Francis's Canticle can be read, retrospectively, as also performing through praise.

Climate Justice and Franciscan Solidarity

The Canticle's integration of social and ecological concerns speaks to contemporary climate justice movements. As environmental justice scholars document, climate impacts disproportionately harm marginalized communities—the Global South, Indigenous peoples, racial minorities, the poor (Bullard, 2000; Whyte, 2017)—requiring frameworks that link environmental protection with social justice.

Francis's text offers an early precedent for this kind of linkage. His praise for those who forgive for love of you and endure sickness and tribulation appears in the same text as praise for sun and water (Armstrong et al., 1999, p. 114)—a juxtaposition that this article reads as theologically deliberate: suffering humans and nonhuman creation are placed within a single community of vulnerability. As Fargione (2013, p. 175) observes, ecological crisis and social crisis are interwoven phenomena rooted in shared structures of exploitation.

Pope Francis's 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si'* draws explicitly on this Franciscan tradition, opening with a quotation from the Canticle and arguing for an "integral ecology" that refuses separation between environmental and social concerns (Francis, 2015, sec. 10), so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor (Francis, 2015, sec. 49). This integral approach, rooted in thirteenth-century Franciscan cosmology, offers one resource, among several, for twenty-first-century climate justice thinking.

Biodiversity Loss and the Value of Difference

The sixth mass extinction—driven by habitat destruction, climate change, pollution, and overexploitation—threatens approximately one million species (IPBES, 2019), representing not merely loss of "resources" but erasure of distinct forms of being. As Iovino (2016, p. 89) argues, every species embodies distinctive ways of mattering, of contributing to the planet's material narratives.

Francis's earth stanza celebrates precisely this material diversity:

Laudato si', mi' Signore, per sora nostra madre Terra, la quale ne sustenta et governa, et produce diversi fructi con coloriti fiori et herba. [Praised be you, my Lord, through

our Sister Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and produces diverse fruits with colored flowers and grass.]

The phrase *diversi fructi con coloriti flori* celebrates difference for its own sake. Earth produces not merely fruit but diverse fruits, not merely flowers but colored flowers. This attention to variety and particularity suggests intrinsic value in multiplicity. As Armbruster and Wallace (2001, p. 8) note in their ecocritical reading of Italian literature, biodiversity can be understood as an ethical concern and not merely an ecological necessity—a recognition that each form of life has its own worth, its own narrative, its own claim to existence.

This Franciscan appreciation for difference extends beyond species to encompass material forms: Brother Fire's playfulness, Sister Water's humility, Brother Wind's variability. Each element manifests distinct qualities within the cosmic community the Canticle imagines. Read in an age of mass extinction and ecosystem stress, Francis's celebration of diversity offers both a historical counterpoint to instrumentalizing views of nature and, more cautiously, a resource for articulating what is lost when that diversity disappears.

Ecocritical Reading: Language and Cosmology

Performative Kinship

Speech act theory (Austin, 1975; Butler, 1990) offers tools for analyzing how the Canticle's language performs rather than merely describes cosmic relationships. By repeatedly invoking sibling terminology, Francis does not simply report preexisting kinship but enacts it linguistically.

Consider the stanza on Brother Sun, which immediately follows the opening invocation:

Laudato si', mi' Signore, per frate Sole, lo quale è iorno, et allumini noi per lui. Et ellu è bellu e radiante cum grande splendore: de te, Altissimo, porta significatione. [Praised be you, my Lord, through Brother Sun, who is the day, and through whom you give us light. And he is beautiful and

radiant with great splendor: of you, Most High, he bears the likeness.]

The progression here is notable. Francis begins with fraternal address (*frate Sole*), then identifies the sun's function (*lo quale è iorno*), describes his aesthetic qualities (*bellu e radiante*), and finally establishes his theological significance (*porta significatione*). This movement from kinship to utility to beauty to meaning resists privileging any single dimension. The sun is figured simultaneously as brother, servant, artwork, and symbol—a multivalent being not reduced to instrumental value.

The grammatical choices reinforce this complexity: Francis uses masculine pronouns (*ellu*, "he") for the sun, personalizing what Latin theology typically treated as neuter (*sol*), while *bellu e radiante* suggests aesthetic agency—the sun actively manifests beauty—granting it a subjecthood medieval cosmology typically reserved for rational beings.

The water stanza discussed above offers a related example. Francis's four adjectives—*utile*, *humile*, *pretiosa*, *casta*—are linked paratactically with "and" (*et*) rather than subordinated hierarchically, mirroring the horizontal cosmology that characterizes the *Canticle* as a whole. Water's utility does not trump her preciousness; her humility does not negate her value. All qualities coexist without ranking, just as, in the *Canticle's* imagined community, all creatures coexist as siblings without strict hierarchy.

This performative dimension helps explain the text's rhetorical power. Francis does not argue for reconsidering humanity's relationship to nature; he enacts that relationship through praise. The *Canticle's* illocutionary force lies in its capacity to reshape the reader's or listener's perception by modeling a different mode of attention (Murdoch, 1970, pp. 1–45).

Vernacular Accessibility as Democratic Practice

The political significance of vernacular composition extends beyond simple accessibility. Medieval Latin functioned as what Bourdieu (1986) called "cultural capital"—a marker of social distinction that legitimated clerical authority—and by composing in Umbrian dialect, Francis redistributed cosmological knowledge to those excluded from Latin literacy.

The fire stanza's *iocundo* (playful) likewise demonstrates how the vernacular enables vivid, embodied description not readily available through scholastic Latin terminology such as *ignis* or *flamma*. Its playfulness alongside strength (*robustoso et forte*) captures fire's dual nature as delightful and dangerous. The Umbrian's rhythm and sound—the alliteration in *bello et iocundo et robustoso et forte*, the internal rhyme in *nocte/forte*—create a musicality difficult to preserve in translation; Francis composed the Canticle to be sung, and its sonic qualities invite participation regardless of education.

The earth stanza's double designation—*sora* (sister) and *matre* (mother)—further illustrates this accessible richness: Earth is figured both as sibling within the cosmic family and as the one who sustains (*sustenta*) and governs (*governa*) it, an active rather than passive agency. This democratization of religious and cosmological knowledge parallels the Canticle's horizontal cosmology. Just as all creatures participate in praise regardless of hierarchical status, the vernacular form allows people regardless of education or social position to access Francis's vision. The form, in this sense, enacts something of the content it describes.

Franciscan Material Kinship: Contemporary Applications, Considered Cautiously

The preceding sections have argued that the Canticle enacts material kinship through specific textual and rhetorical strategies. This section considers, more selectively than a fuller treatment might, what that concept might offer to contemporary environmental thought and practice—while remaining clear that the primary text can ground these applications only loosely, as analogy and orientation rather than as direct precedent or policy blueprint.

Ethics and Policy

Contemporary climate policy relies heavily on frameworks—carbon pricing, ecosystem services valuation, natural capital accounting—that instrumentalize nature even as they seek to protect it (Norgaard, 2010). Material kinship suggests a different orientation: if water is figured as kin rather than resource, its depletion becomes legible as a breach of relationship rather than merely an inefficiency. This orientation resonates with, without directly generating, legal-political developments such as Rights of Nature frameworks, which grant legal standing to rivers and ecosystems in some

jurisdictions (Boyd, 2017; e.g., Republic of Ecuador, 2008, arts. 71–74; Charpleix, 2018). I note this resonance cautiously: the Canticle is a devotional text, not a legal or policy document, and its usefulness here lies in supplying an alternative conceptual vocabulary—kinship rather than capital—more than a template for institutional design.

Justice and Multispecies Ethics

The Canticle's juxtaposition of praise for Sister Water and praise for those who forgive and endure suffering (Armstrong et al., 1999, p. 114) models an integration of ecological and social concern that resonates, in a limited and specifically textual sense, with the "integral ecology" articulated in *Laudato Si'* (Francis, 2015, secs. 10, 49). Contemporary climate justice scholarship, which documents how environmental harm falls disproportionately on marginalized communities (Bullard, 2000; Whyte, 2017), and multispecies ethics, which asks what is owed to nonhuman beings (Meijer, 2019), both extend this kind of integration considerably further than the Canticle itself does. Francis's contribution is not a worked-out theory of justice but a rhetorical and theological precedent for holding ecological and social concern together—a precedent later movements have drawn on explicitly, as when *Laudato Si'* opens with a citation from the Canticle (Francis, 2015, sec. 1).

Education

Because material kinship is enacted performatively—through address and praise rather than argument—it also suggests a pedagogical orientation. Environmental education modeled on the Canticle would emphasize sustained attention to material particularity and affective relationship with nonhuman matter, alongside more conventional transmission of ecological information (Fargione, 2017), on the premise that Francis's text teaches primarily by embodied example rather than by abstract proposition.

Reception History and Continuing Influence

Medieval to Modern

The Canticle's influence on subsequent Italian literature was significant. Dante's *Commedia* reflects Franciscan themes throughout, particularly in the Paradiso's vision of cosmic harmony (Hawkins, 1999, pp. 203–228); Jacopone da Todi's lauds draw on Francis's style and theology (Underhill, 1919, pp. 89–112); and Renaissance humanists including Lorenzo de' Medici helped preserve and circulate the text (Vauchez, 2012, pp. 289–312).

The Romantic period witnessed renewed interest in Francis as a proto-ecological figure: Wordsworth and Coleridge found in Franciscan nature mysticism an alternative to mechanical philosophy (Bate, 1991, pp. 39–67), a reception that, while sometimes romanticizing Francis, recognized the Canticle's challenge to instrumental rationality.

Contemporary Interpretations

Recent decades have seen substantial growth in Franciscan studies from environmental perspectives (Cusato & Coughlin, 1997): theologians including Boff (1997) and Edwards (2006) have developed Franciscan ecology as an alternative to dominionist Christianity, while ecocritics including Westling (2013) and Slovic (1992) have examined the Canticle's literary strategies and contemporary relevance.

The Canticle has also inspired interfaith environmental dialogue. Buddhist, Indigenous, and secular environmental thinkers have found points of contact with Franciscan kinship ethics (Tucker & Grim, 1997–2004). This ecumenical reception suggests the Canticle's vision extends beyond its specifically Christian context to address broader human concerns, though the extent of that extension is itself a question this article leaves open rather than resolves.

Critiques and Limitations

The Question of Agency

One critique of kinship-based environmental ethics concerns agency and responsibility: if all creatures are siblings, who bears responsibility for ecological protection? White's (1967) influential essay blamed Christianity for environmental crisis precisely because it privileged human dominion; while White praised Francis as exceptional, some scholars argue Franciscan kinship merely inverts rather than resolves problematic anthropocentrism (Kay, 1988). This critique has merit but requires nuance: Francis does not claim equal capacity for agency but recognizes equal worth, grounding obligation in distinctive human capability for both harm and care rather than requiring strict ontological parity.

Medieval Context and Modern Application

Another concern involves anachronism—reading contemporary environmental concerns into medieval texts. Sorrell (1988, pp. 15–22) cautions against "retrofitting" Francis with modern ecological consciousness, noting his concerns were theological rather than environmental in contemporary senses. This methodological concern is central to the present article, which—consistent with the distinction between historical claim and contemporary application set out in the Methodology section above—treats the *Canticle's* continuities with present-day environmental thought as resonance and retrospective applicability rather than anticipation. Francis did not face climate change or biodiversity loss as we understand them; his text addresses long-standing questions about human relationship to nonhuman nature, and it is this longer-standing engagement, rather than any specific modern diagnosis, that the article treats as a resource for present reflection.

Gender and Kinship Language

Feminist scholars have noted tensions in Francis's gendered kinship language: Sister Moon, Sister Water, and Sister Mother Earth are feminized, potentially reinforcing problematic associations between women and nature (Ruether, 1992, pp. 147–172), while Brother Sun and Brother Fire receive more active descriptions than the "humble," "useful" Sister Water (Armstrong et al., 1999, p. 114). This critique identifies real issues, though the *Canticle's* most

significant move arguably lies less in its specific gender attributions than in its fundamental extension of kinship to nonhuman nature—a tradition later Franciscans, including Clare of Assisi, complicated and enriched (Mueller, 2006).

Conclusion: Material Kinship for Planetary Survival

The 800th anniversary of the *Cantico delle Creature*, and the approaching 800th anniversary of Francis's death, arrive at a moment of considerable ecological concern: climate change, biodiversity loss, and ecosystem degradation are widely documented and increasingly urgent. These crises are not caused by conceptual habits alone, but habits of thought—treating nature as inert resource, separating human from nonhuman, privileging extraction over relationship—are implicated in how such crises have been allowed to develop and in how they continue to be addressed.

This article has argued that Francis's *Canticle* offers one resource, among several possible resources, for reconsidering those habits. Through close textual analysis informed by material ecocriticism (Iovino & Oppermann, 2014; Iovino, 2016; Fargione, 2013, 2015, 2017; Armbruster, 1998), I have shown how Francis's text enacts material kinship: a recognition of agency, narrative capacity, and ethical standing in nonhuman matter, performed through sibling terminology, paratactic description, and vernacular accessibility, and distinguishable from related concepts such as material agency, relational ontology, and deep ecology. His integration of social and ecological concern offers a historically specific precedent for the "integral ecology" more fully developed in later environmental humanities and theological scholarship (Oppermann & Iovino, 2017; Francis, 2015).

I want to restate, in closing, what kind of claim this article has made. I have not argued that Francis anticipated posthumanist theory, biodiversity ethics, or climate justice frameworks in any strong sense; his concerns were theological, shaped by the intellectual world of thirteenth-century Umbria (Sorrell, 1988). What I have argued is that his text displays a conceptual resonance with these later frameworks, and that it remains retrospectively applicable as a resource for thinking through present ecological questions—a more modest claim, but, I have tried to show, a defensible and useful one.

The concept of material kinship developed here requires further elaboration. Future research might examine how it engages Indigenous cosmologies of reciprocal relationship with land and water (Todd, 2016); how it might inform Rights of Nature legal frameworks in more sustained detail (Charpleix, 2018; Stone, 2010); how curricula built on it affect environmental attitudes (Fargione, 2017); how "storied matter" illuminates other premodern texts (Iovino, 2010); and how it applies to emerging technologies that increasingly mediate human–nature relationships (Haraway, 2016).

Francis composed the *Canticle* while gravely ill and nearing blindness (Armstrong et al., 1999, pp. 254–256), a biographical fact worth noting without over-interpreting: it does not by itself validate the text's arguments, but it is consistent with the sense, argued throughout this article, that the *Canticle's* praise of creation was not naive but considered. Eight centuries later, the text remains a useful, if partial and historically bounded, resource for thinking about matter, agency, kinship, and care—questions that current ecological conditions make newly pressing, even if they do not make Francis's answers to them simply our own.

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